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Time Essay: The Games: Winning Without Medals

By HP-Time.com; Roger Rosenblatt

As if the answer were easy, Themistocles, when asked whether he would prefer to have been Achilles or Homer, replied: "Which would you rather be, a conqueror in the Olympic Games or the crier that proclaims who are the conquerors?" A navy man, Themistocles saw no honor in being out of things. He would not have understood the U.S. role of spectator to this year's Olympic Games, or how a country whose national pride has so often been hoisted in those Games could settle for the bleachers.

Right now, the U.S. feels none of that particular sort of pride. Instead many Americans, including those who would have been competing in Moscow, are wondering if what they are feeling is any sort of pride at all or merely the discomfort of having taken a difficult moral position that is beginning to feel a bit tight at the neck. After all, aren't those young men and women just playing games over there? Is the U.S. a spoilsport?

Were it not for the remarks of the presidents of the International Olympic Committee, the political significance of the Olympics would probably never be in question. Yet as recently as July 14, Lord Killanin opened a session of the I.O.C. by expressing his great fear for the future of the Games "if politicians continue to make use of sport for their own ends." Steady as the Olympic torch, that sort of mindlessness has been passed from I.O.C. president to I.O.C. president, from Avery Brundage to Killanin, and soon, most likely, to President-elect Juan Antonio Samaranch, who sounds a lot like his predecessors. All owe their conventional wisdom, if not their tone, to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Games. Decreed Coubertin: "The essential thing in life is not conquering, but fighting well." The words are charming, and perhaps even true, but they have never applied to the Olympics.

Certainly, nothing in the ancient history of the Games supports the idea that they are apolitical. Brundage lamented that in ancient Greece wars were suspended for the Olympics, whereas today the Olympics are suspended for wars. In fact, the first Olympics were dry runs for wars. Once, in 364 B.C., the Eleians turned a dry run into the real McCoy and swooped down on the Pisates during the Games. They won. The modern marathon, "inspired by the tale of a soldier who ran 25 miles to report a victory, commemorates both politics and conquest. As for the glory of fighting well, one needs only to read Pindar on the ignominy of the losers.

The other old Olympics sham is that the Games foster international good will. If logic failed to destroy that idea, observation would do nicely, since the sight of mingling, embracing athletes at the close of the Games is characteristic of nothing in the world or in the Games themselves but momentary (and partly ceremonial) good nature. Observers of the sporting life, like Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, had a dimmer view of the Games. Orwell called them "war minus the shooting." The connection with war has always been up front. Coubertin, who argued for French colonialism as ardently as he did for reviving the Olympics, admired the relationship between British colonialism and sports in the public schools. Every Etonian knows how Wellington is supposed to have explained Waterloo. Hitler, who had a way with brass tacks, said bluntly in *Mein Kampf*: Give me an athlete and I'll give you an army—which he did, to Austria, two years after the success of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Of course, "war minus the shooting" may be a way of justifying the Games, but that is something quite different from stating that the element of war is not present.

Not that anyone needs to reach for the ancients, or for theories, to connect the Olympics and politics. A casual scanning of events in the modern Games shows that for every example of exchanged T shirts and kisses among competing nations there are a dozen instances of international cheating, needling and foul play, all laced with as much nationalism as competitive nastiness. In 1908, British officials dragged the Italian marathoner Dorando Pietri over the finish line in an attempt to withhold victory from the

American Johnny Hayes. The water polo match between the Soviet Union and Hungary in 1956 ended with a bloody-faced Hungarian in the pool. Boycotts have been threatened before, and two actually occurred: the African boycotts of 1972 and 1976. (Many Americans sought to boycott the 1936 Olympics, but Brundage prevailed, explaining Nazi anti-Semitism as a "religious dispute.") If hard evidence of the political character of the Moscow Games were needed, there are plenty of Soviet statements to draw on. The bestselling Handbook of Party Activists maintains that the decision to give the Games to Moscow "was convincing testimony to the general recognition of the historic importance and correctness of the foreign policy course of our country, of the enormous service of the Soviet Union in the struggle for peace."

Killanin and Brundage have always contended that the Games are contests among individuals, not nations. This is a patently preposterous claim, given the I.O.C. prohibition against athletes competing as individuals rather than as nationals of a specific country. Several countries that refused to lend their national stature to the opening ceremonies were nevertheless happy to be identified in the Games. The nuances grow tedious, the examples superfluous. Every country that has ever participated in the Olympic Games, ancient or modern, knows that the events have political analogues, effects and overtones, and that the host country always gains useful prestige. When nations as powerful and athletic as the U.S., Canada, West Germany and Japan stay out of the Games, the damage cannot fail to be political.

Still, even if the viewer could suspend politics, would it also be possible to see the Games purely as sport, without attaching any moral element to them? Deciphering one particular game, May Swenson wrote: "It's about/ the ball,/ the bat,/ and the mitt." Few others see sports as cleanly. Every golden age from the Greeks forward has made the connection between body and soul, between physical and moral education. The key to the connection is youth. The simple fact that athletes are young traditionally brings them closer to goodness, or, as the Romantics believed, to heaven itself. The demonstration of excellence in anything is implicitly moral. It can even seem supernatural. One need not be a sports fan to appreciate an element of unexpressed awe in athletic events, especially in the Olympic Games, which began as one sort of ritual and continue as another. All ritual suggests the presence of the sacred.

For Americans, the connection between morality and sport has never been in doubt. The interesting thing about Frank Merriwell was not simply that he won everything, but that he was perfect in every way (he settled strikes, wrote hit plays). Similarly, the disappointment in someone like Bruce Jenner is that he is merely perfect in one way, or rather in ten. The All-American Boy is first an athlete. Only in America could Shoeless Joe Jackson be considered tragic instead of pathetic; could an old man of the sea vow to be "worthy of the great DiMaggio"; or could national leaders make mad displays of their athleticism in order to prove how fit they are for their job. Courage, selfdiscipline, resourcefulness, will, stature, coolness under fire—all are terms that Americans like to associate with themselves and with their athletes. Even in these hard-boiled times, what American soul does not quiver in some monumental epiphany at Breaking Away or Bad News Bears or Rocky?

Yet what exactly is being quivered at: the presence of beauty, sublimity, God? Coubertin might have been dreaming to apply his idea of "fighting well" to the meaning of the Olympics, but he was right about attaching the general idea of struggle to virtue. That struggle is what people admire in sporting events, in the Olympic Games above all. They make an illogical leap from the virtue of the athlete to the virtue of the Games, and then, without a pause, to the virtue of the setting, the framework of the Games: hop, skip, jump. What those in the Moscow boycott are doing by taking themselves out of that process is to prevent symbolic, irrational connections from being made on their behalf. Conversely, they are insisting by their absence that the participating countries acknowledge frankly their implicit approval of the Soviets.

To put it harshly: the countries participating in the Moscow Olympics are symbolically abetting the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. Those countries bear the burden, not the individual athletes. The other day Henry Marsh, a U.S. track star, who would have had a chance for a medal in the steeplechase, said: "How can you compete in a country which is killing—slaughtering—innocent people right next door? Personally it would have been hard for me to go to Moscow and still feel good about myself." Yet it would be much to ask of an individual athlete to defy his country's official decision and boycott on his

own. That some athletes have done so is admirable, even remarkable, but the issue is no more an individual one than anything else in the Olympics. The onus sits squarely with the nations that voted to go, and they will have plenty of opportunity in the months ahead to decide if travel is broadening.

At the same time, it would be foolish to suggest that the symbolic importance of any one Olympics is vast and eternal. Every time the I.O.C. lofts one of its round-toned fatuities about the purity of the Olympic Games, there is an instant temptation to push the button and roar that the Games are the world's most significant political events. The Games have their significance, but they also come and go; the political advantages come and go; in the long run, even the champions come and go. No matter what Themistocles thought of Homer, no one would remember Achilles were it not for the heel. As for the possible collapse of the Olympics after Moscow, that would not be the worst thing either. The Games collapsed in 393 B.C. because someone (the Emperor Theodosius) held to a principle (that they were pagan), and neither sport nor the world came to an end in the 1,503-year hiatus.

What makes the boycott peculiarly tough on Americans is that so much of their history is tied to sports. The great period of American inventions, in the late 19th century, was also the era when organized sports came into their own, the one freeing time for the other. Since then, there has always been an explicit association of sports with the old success dream: every up-and-coming athlete a potential Horatio Alger hero. In some ways the modern history of the U.S. is a huge, complex athletic event; industries, immigrants and ideologies are continuously vying with one another for clear-cut victories. For capitalists, it is a special strain to be on the outs of a competition.

The strain is honorable. It would have been honorable had no other country joined the boycott of the Olympic Games. It would be honorable still if, by some measure, it were determined that the political damage done the Soviets was minimal. The essential thing in life, sometimes, is not conquering, but fighting well.

August 11, 1980

SECTION: Currents in the News; Pg. 8

LENGTH: 290 words

HEADLINE: For U.S Olympians, Bitterness Lingers

BODY:

For more than 400 American athletes kept out of the **Olympics** by the U.S. boycott, there were medals, gifts, parties, a dinner at the White House and praise from President Carter.

But to most of the athletes, the free week in Washington in late July was a poor substitute for a trip to Moscow and a chance at **Olympic** medals.

Bitterness was evident. Some refused to get into a receiving line to shake hands with the President, who initiated the boycott. There were complaints that athletes had been used for political ends. "I'm here to make sure this never happens again," said buttons worn by several of the guests.

Carter got no applause when he told his visitors that the boycott "was a vital and indispensable reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" and praised them for having done "as much as any other group of people anywhere on earth to hold high the banner of liberty and peace."

The reaction of many was expressed in a statement by a group of track athletes: "While we strongly deplore overt, aggressive acts by one nation against another, we question whether the boycott of the Olympic Games is the best means available to assist the cause of world peace."

During the festivities, which cost the U.S. Olympic Committee \$950,000, those who qualified for the Olympic team were given gold-plated medals issued by Congress, along with the cowboy clothes and boots they would have worn to Moscow.

Amid the mourning for the lost Olympics of 1980 came a ray of hope for the 1984 games, scheduled for Los Angeles. The government granted the U.S. Olympic Committee 10 million dollars, the first federal funds it ever received. It will help make up for public contributions lost in the boycott.

August 11, 1980

SECTION: Analysis; Pg. 43

LENGTH: 810 words

HEADLINE: **Olympic** Boycott: What It Proved, What It Didn't

BYLINE: By ROBERT P. MARTIN, chief of the Moscow bureau

DATELINE: MOSCOW

HIGHLIGHT:

U.S. and Russia both had hopes of reaping political hay from the games in Moscow. The outcome: A superpower standoff.

BODY:

The Moscow **Olympics** turned out to be neither the roaring success sought by the Kremlin nor the disaster that boycotting nations had hoped to inflict on the Soviet Union as punishment for its invasion of Afghanistan.

As the two weeks of competition drew to an August 3 close, the profit and loss columns for the United States and Russia looked like this:

* Athletes from Communist countries--especially the Soviet Union and East Germany--dominated competition. Many world records were set, as expected. A plus for Moscow.

* The Russians did not win many new friends or admirers with their heavy security measures or their alleged cheating in some events. A debit for the Kremlin, which had hoped to enhance the Soviet image.

* The games failed to persuade the non-Communist world to look more kindly on Soviet foreign policy in general or the Afghan invasion in particular. Besides the more than 60 nations that boycotted the games, 16 countries that did show up refused to march or show their flags in ceremonies. Another setback for Moscow.

* President Carter's boycott failed either to get the games moved from Moscow or to induce Russia to pull its troops out of Afghanistan. That's a setback for the White House.

* The press from the Communist world lambasted the U.S. and its boycotting allies for not participating and justifiably praised the Soviets for staging a stupendous athletic spectacle. That was no surprise--and no real gain for either side.

It all adds up to no clear victory for either of the superpowers in using the Olympic Games as a political weapon.

The boycott did damage the Olympic movement. But Olympic supporters doubt that the wound will prove fatal. The Olympics have survived other crises, such as the slaughter of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists in Munich in 1972 and a boycott by African nations of the Montreal games in 1976.

Despite the U.S.-led boycott that kept many of the world's best athletes away, the games cannot be faulted for inferior performances.

More than 30 world records were set. In swimming, there were seven new world and 13 new Olympic marks. Poland's pole vaulter Wladyslaw Kozakiewicz set a world record of 18 feet 11 1/2 inches. East German Gerd Wessig jumped a world-record height of 7 feet 8.8 inches.

Other records undoubtedly would have been broken if such boycotting nations as the U.S., West Germany, Japan and Canada had sent their stars here. Several Americans have exceeded the records that were set in Moscow. Says a British sportswriter: "With the Americans out of the games, a lot of competitors got medals they otherwise would never have had a chance of winning."

Bottom line. The boycott also meant that some athletes at the games performed far below Olympic standards. Many teams were beefed up with inexperienced performers at Soviet urging--and sometimes with Soviet financial aid--to swell the number of entrants.

Examples: Tanzania entered a men's field-hockey team for the first time simply to give Soviet organizers an even number of teams. It gave up a high total of 28 goals in three matches. A bicyclist from Zimbabwe fell off his cycle 10 yards into his first race. A Libyan swimmer finished more than a minute behind the winner in a 400-meter race.

Despite Soviet attempts to pad the entry list, the 5,928 competitors from 81 countries made up the smallest field since the Tokyo games of 1964.

Soviet journalists searched diligently among athletes, coaches and spectators for praise of the Soviet effort--and scorn for the boycotters. They found some of both.

When the U.S. government gave the U.S. Olympic Committee 10 million dollars to develop the American Olympic movement, a commentator for the Soviet news agency Tass said it "demonstrates once again the extent to which the shopkeeper mentality has affected the U.S. politicians who think that money can buy anything, including sports pride."

West Germany's head of the International Shooting Union was quoted as saying: "During the Olympics, Moscow has turned into a world center of peace, friendship and understanding among peoples."

Moscow was indeed a zone of peace, free of violence or major demonstrations. But there was little chance for friendship or contact between the Soviet people and Western visitors. It was not a typically festive Olympic atmosphere.

Communist Runaway

Medals won in Moscow Olympics--

	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
U.S.S.R.	77	59	46	182
East Germany	43	34	40	117
Bulgaria	6	16	16	38
Hungary	7	9	14	30
Poland	2	13	15	30
Rumania	5	5	12	22
Britain	5	7	8	20
Czechoslovakia	1	3	9	13
Italy	7	3	3	13
France	6	3	3	12
Others	25	29	47	101

Note: Includes events completed through August 1.

August 11, 1980, UNITED STATES EDITION

SECTION: THE COLUMNISTS; PETE AXTHELM; Pg. 51

LENGTH: 1026 words

HEADLINE: Cheating as an Olympic Event

BYLINE: PETE **AXTHELM**

BODY:

Now that the Soviets have concluded their massive and many-splendored Olympics, it seems a shame that so much attention has been focused on a small detail like cheating. In fact, I think we visitors owe it to our hosts to look at the positive side of their cheating. So I have figured out three good things to say about the phenomenon.

First, it enlivened some of the dullest moments of the Moscow Games. Soviets athletes named Dainis Kula and Viktor Rasshchupkin, for example, were scarcely noticed west of the Urals after their desultory victories in the javelin and discus -- until it turned out that they had been aided by Soviet track officials operating inside the field and outside the rules. Better yet, these relatively obscure events suddenly became stark little dramas, because the Soviet style of cheating is as guileless and straight-forward as a tank.

Second, the rule-bending should be understood in light of a broader philosophy. Soviet sports bureaucrats, like their diplomatic brethren, believe that they must maintain control of certain spheres of influence in their world. The triple jump, like Afghanistan, is perceived as such a sphere. The Russians have been winning the event as long as most fans can recall, and they had no intention of relinquishing the Olympic title in their home jumping pit. So while local heroes Jaak Uudmae and Viktor Saneyev were finishing one-two, their two main non-Communist rivals were taking a dozen jumps between them -- and being cited for an amazing total of nine fouls. What must be done, in such matters, must be done.

Spirit: But the third and best thing about the affair is that it accomplished what most Olympic leaders can only preach about -- a form of true hands-clasped-across-the-metal-detector international spirit. I'm not sure if the judge who nudged a Cuban's discus mark from gold territory into bronze ever studied the late Vince Lombardi. But it seems safe to say he was thinking that winning wasn't everything, it was the only thing. And the Russian team members who flashed wind signals to their fellow pole vaulters in a highly questionable tactic didn't need a Leo Durocher to tell them that nice guys finish last. Daley Thompson, the British decathlon champion, seemed surprised as he complained that a home-court official tried to slip him a damp discus: you could almost hear the hearty chuckle that such naiveté would evoke from spitball master Gaylord Perry.

This is not to suggest that Americans condone cheating on the bullying level at which the Soviets acted last week. When they convinced 77-year-old Adriaan Paulen, the Dutch president of the International Amateur Athletic Federation, to keep his red-jacketed observers in the stands, Russian judges claimed all the close-range decisions for themselves. From that point on, the abuses were flagrant and the rumors hysterical.

The alleged open-door policy, to cite one bizarre charge, consisted of winging open a huge door to Lenin Stadium just in time to provide a tail wind for Soviet Javelin tossers. Track buffs say that even if this happened, it could not have generated enough breeze to help; they also note that the wind-signaling in the pole vault was unsporting but not technically illegal. But the triple-jump foul calls and the misplacing of both javelin and discus marks strike most experts as clearcut violations. They also cap off a series of strange judgment calls that gave home-team stars victories over Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci and East German diver Falk Hoffman.

With the aid of the bumbling IAAF officials, who belatedly took their rightful places in the stadium last week, the Soviets were firm in their denials. But if they ever choose to debate on another scale, they could claim that their

tampering pales somewhat before a Billy Martin-ordered beanball attack or a head-hunting, away- from-the-play tackle by Jack ("They Call Me Assassin") Tatum. Once you accept the theory that winning is vastly more important than merely competing, it's only a small step to rule-breaking in any sport or any language.

Non-Clout: The flaw in that argument is that our pro sports officials can alter rules and impose penalties designed to stop the cheating. International amateur officials seem helpless to do the same. The heralded doping-control system, for example, managed to catch seven Eastern European women last year. They were banned for life. But as the Olympics approached, administrators succumbed to Eastern bloc pressure and quietly cut some of the sentences to ten months so five of the women could compete. With that kind of non-clout, perhaps officials should shrug and designate cheating as an Olympic event, a blight of our times only slightly more depressing than team handball or that eagerly awaited 1984 addition, synchronized swimming.

The truth is that the Moscow Games have been boycotted, propaganda-fueled and marvelously organized -- and none of it has dented the essential dishonesty of the Olympics. From the state-supported Communists to the countless Westerners who take handouts from sporting-goods companies, boosters or rule-skirting colleges, the "amateurs" in the major sports are a sham.

The solution -- opening the Games to amateurs and pros alike -- makes too much sense to happen. In a better world, Steve Ovett could brag about his \$ 50,000 sale of his story rights to a British paper instead of hiding it like a sullen criminal. Maybe Hollywood would even sign Nadia Comaneci to a three-picture deal. But the Communists oppose such capitalism for obvious reasons, and Western officials agree out of a more subtle motive. As one sharp British observer notes, "They see what happened in open sports like golf and tennis -- the players eventually took charge and ran their own affairs."

That unspeakable possibility would leave a lot of red jackets in closets and wound all too much aristocratic pride. So these Olympics leave us with the same depressing question as all the rest: are they worth saving? All that the Soviet cheaters really did was swell the ranks of those of us who say no.